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THE SOCIOLOGY OF A STREET LAYOUT

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It is the triumph of modern city planning that it has learned, and is popularly teaching, the significance of the title of this paper. One who calls to mind the narrow, crowded, tortuous streets in the older parts of foreign cities, realizes how little thought the early builders of cities could have had for "the sociology of a street layout." To them the street was only a way of going, a means of passage. It might be a slit in the wall if so the traffic of the day, perhaps mule-mounted men and burdened women, could squeeze through. That the passage might be sunless, that the liquid sewage of abutting houses trickled down its center, was of no moment if the broad stones of the pavement gave a foothold fairly firm and one could thread his way, through this and connecting apertures, to his journey's end. What, under heaven, was a street for, but to pass through—like a sickness, a sorrow, or any other trouble?

It means much then, that the sociological significance of the street should be perceived. We still have a great deal to learn with regard to it, and merely as discussion the subject is broader than can be compassed in this brief contribution. Here it can be hoped to do no more than to suggest ways in which the street proves itself a sociological factor. Examples of such influence appear in its effect upon the health of those who live upon it; in its influence upon their economic condition; in its effect on their mental and spiritual attitude, and in its modification of their social relations. Under each of these four general heads, many minor headings must suggest themselves. Yet only hints can be given, lest in the subject's alluring ramifications we lose ourselves amid highways and byways of thought as intricate as was the medieval street plan.

First, then, with regard to health. This was one of the earliest matters considered when the social conscience became aware of its responsibility in the platting of streets. Not all at once, of course, but by degrees, this consideration widened the street, so that sun

and air might get between the rows of houses; it drained the street and put sewage underground; for the sake of safety, it separated footway and carriageway, and paved them both; it lighted the street, and planted trees to temper the heat of summer and the cold of winter; sometimes it provided strips of grass. More lately it has cleaned the streets, has laid the dust, or prevented the making of it, and has greatly quieted the passage of those who use them. There has even come to be regard, when practicable, for the street's direction, so that the house upon its border may have healthful orientation, and that winds of too great violence may not make a funnel of the street.

Once the permanent lines of the street have been established, jealous regard for sanitation discovers the wisdom, or necessity, of relating the building ordinances to those lines, so that the street which has been carefully adapted to a certain kind of structure may not suffer loss of adjustment. The distance between opposite houses is therefore regulated by the establishment of a building line; the height of buildings is, at least in many instances, related, by maximum limitation, to the width of the street; and the proportion of the lots which may be occupied is designated. We are even talking now of restricting the cubic contents of structures to the capacity of the streets on which they are; and already in some cities there is dictation as to the use to which the structures may be put. Quickly we found, that is to say, that the maintenance of a street's sanitary and hygienic virtues was dependent on the regulation of the buildings upon its border. This meant recognition of the street as a site for homes, and not only as a passage.

Nor did concern for the physical well being of those who use the street, and they are especially those who live in it, stop at this. The individual street, however perfect, is necessarily part of a system of streets. Its outlets and inlets connect it with a street organism hardly less complex by nature than is the community whose activity creates it. Hence, the function of the street cannot be to serve simply those whose dwellings are at its edge; though to do only that, it must perform some service to the neighborhood, and must play a part in the life of the town.

We find sanitary considerations affecting, therefore, whole street systems. A single thoroughfare is made broader or narrower, more secluded or more brilliant, according to the sociological duty it should

perform to the town as a whole. Perhaps in a mean and poor environment it is broadened that its strong air currents may freshen a neighborhood; that its tide of life may stifle morbid meditation with hope and inspiration; or that by the directness and facility it gives to traffic, it may greatly widen the available home-building area and lessen the pressure of living. In short, the street has a duty to perform not only in protecting the health of those who live upon it, but in also protecting that of the community. When we talk of the sociology of a street layout, these are functions that we must keep in view, and we must recognize their potency.

The second group of influences which a street exerts upon the lives of those who live about it is, we have said, economic. Here again there is the effect of the street by itself and the effect of the street as part of a system. The degree of its influence under the latter heading varies with the degree of its importance to the system. If it has been platted as a main, arterial highway, designed to carry lines of rapid transit, or by other means to open tracts for building, the measure of its success in doing this is of enormous importance to the economic welfare of the community. A physical inadequacy—due, it may be, to grade, to indirectness or narrowness—might easily add several minutes to the time required to reach a certain section of the town. Such addition might reduce the available building area by hundreds of acres, and raise the normal rent level in every nook and corner of the city. That the item of rent goes far to determine the scale of living needs no explanation. The sociological influence of the street layout is obvious.

But even in the case of a most minor street, a street of no general traffic significance and of interest only to those who live upon it, there still is a connection between the plan of the street—its width and the character of its development—and the economic influence it exerts. It would seem plain, and yet we have only commenced to understand, since illustrative instances have multiplied, that a very expensive street compels costly development of the abutting land, by making it expensive. In other words, excessive street cost—whether this be due to unnecessary width or to a needlessly high type of paving or of furnishing—creates a necessity for high returns. When the people who live on the street cannot separately pay large rents, they have to do so collectively, by herding in apartment or tenement houses.

As a matter of fact it is no uncommon thing for the cost of street development in outlying sections to amount to more than the cost of the land. That is to say, the investment upon which the rents must offer a fair return is doubled by the cost of the street and sewer—and o'ten a large part of the cost is unnecessary. A recent report of the Topographical Survey Commission in Baltimore, where, it is usual to pave three-fifths of the normal 66-foot street, i.e., 39.6 feet, points out that if the paved roadway were narrowed from 39 feet (using even figures) to 24 feet, "thereby providing for three streams of traffic instead of five," there would be a saving of \$17,600 on each mile of paved roadway, the paving being figured at \$2 per square yard. Surely an accommodation for three streams of traffic is as much as most minor residence streets require, while the actual saving would be not only in first cost of construction, but through all the succeeding years in maintenance, in cleaning, flushing, etc. The quotation seems worth making, because of the sociological disinterestedness of its source and because it so plainly cites a conservative example only of the extravagances which may creep into street layouts, with dear results economically to those who reside upon the street. Where people have only a certain definite amount to live upon and capital properly requires return on its investment, the platting of a street is by no means a question of simply the street. Tract owners who have forgotten this fact have paid the penalty of their thoughtlessness not less than have the purchasers and tenants of the lots.

It may also be pointed out that the common practice of making nearly all streets similar, in width and in construction, notwithstanding their varying traffic values, is economically wasteful in other ways than simply in the extravagance of the provision. In adopting a mean standard, which is standardization at its best, there are sure to be some streets which are too narrow as well as some which are too broad. Neither arterial nor non-arterial streets are adapted to their purpose. There is misfit all around. Further, the streets that are needlessly elaborate disintegrate through want of adequate use.

Another very serious indirect feature of such platting, from the standpoint of the economic welfare of those who own abutting property, is that stability in values is discouraged. There is no physical reason why business should take one street rather than another. An enterprising property owner, or group of owners, may draw it

out of one street and into another, with a disastrous destruction of values. On the other hand, business may invade a street of fine homes, reducing values for a long period, not to speak of the social discomforts which come in the train of such a change. If a few streets gain in speculative attractiveness, through the possibility of transition from residence to business, many lose in the extended period which the transition requires, and in fact even before it begins, because of its mere possibility. For it is notorious that a man will pay a higher price for a lot on the sort of street he prefers if he can be assured of the permanence of the street's character.

From an economic standpoint, it appears, therefore, that the layout of the street affects very closely those who own or rent property upon it. There is no point, in fact, where the community touches so surely the family pocketbook, for it may be reflected that practically all our assessments and nearly all our taxes are for the construction and upkeep of the street and of the public utilities below and above it. The old plaint of the pessimist, that nothing is sure but death and taxes, suggests that to ward off the former and reduce the latter would be to mend greatly the lot of humanity. If so, there is given to the platter of streets a golden opportunity.

The third direction in which the street was declared to have a social influence, deserving of consideration quite apart from its traffic function, was in its influence upon the mental and spiritual attitude of those who make use of it. One aspect of this was somewhat baldly expressed in the course of a speech by John Burns, before the international city planning conference in London, in 1910, when he said: "Mean streets make mean people." Most of us can think of so many illustrious exceptions to this dictum, that it fails to carry full conviction. And yet it doubtless is true that the dull, dreary monotonous environment offered by countless streets in almost any city must, in the aggregate, have a very depressing effect. If environments can enliven and inspire, they must also have the power to deaden and discourage. We may not know how far the misery of the very poor, lack of ambition and gloominess of temper, may be due to the cumulative influence of disheartening streets.

We have, however, had pointed out to us, by no less an authority than Jane Addams, that much sin and subsequent suffering are traceable to a veritable, and pitiful struggle for existence by the spirit of youth which the community is starving in city streets. This

reckless struggle represents reaction from, and protest against, an enveloping gloom that is unrelieved. It has been said of the joyous Latin races that they find in the street an out-of-doors room. If the poorer of our citizens can pass only from dismal rooms to sadder streets, we must not wonder that lights and music sometimes lure them into dangerous places, or that the voice of the agitator alone awakes an echo in dull ears. The thoughtlessness that has planned and built some familiar types of city streets has, then, more to answer for than emaciated bodies and purses; it is responsible, in part at least, for minds and souls. Little children born into such streets, are grown old while their lips yet lisp; and the pallor that transforms ruddy cheeked boys and girls, who have exchanged the sunny fields for city streets, is but an index of the light that has faded from their hearts.

There is, be it noted, another side to this. The reverse was aptly expressed in Paul's proud boast. The Greeks had a saying that "to make the city loved we must make it lovely." Most of us have seen, too, the transforming effect of a street improvement upon a neighborhood. To take a dilapidated street, and pave it, clean it, light it, and keep it clean, is to effect a local metamorphosis. Front yards are furnished up, houses put in order, back yards and interiors feel the influence of the new spirit. There is born a self respect that promptly manifests itself in dress and carriage. The improved street has, in short, an improved population.

Higher in the social scale a like change has a like result, though less dramatically. Change a street into a parkway, placed in charge of the park commission and elaborately kept up, and you will see lawns better kept, and landscape gardening making its appearance. Of course the interplay of forces in these changes is complex. The effect is not mental alone, but is partly economic. Yet it is all sociological. It testifies to the power of the street in matters that are not at all connected with traffic.

Finally, it would be interesting to speculate on how much the platter of streets may do for people by so aligning his street as to open beautiful views. He may do this by centering it on a lovely spire, a mountain, or other satisfactory ascent; by carrying it around a hill; or by curving it so that front windows may command a charming street picture, without requiring great width of street or dooryard; or even by so altering the line of walk or curb as to save a noble tree.

It is no slight matter to give a person a beautiful picture to live with, and the street platter may give such a picture to many people. After all, in thinking of the street's mental and spiritual influence, we have to remember that for very many people it is pretty much all of the world they see.

We come to the fourth sphere of a street's influence, its modification of social relations. There have been suggestions as to this effect of the street in the discussion of its other influence. Necessarily, there is some overlapping between the groups, since they are headings based for convenience on only predominating characteristics. Rent changes for instance, have not simply economic significance. To force the dwellers on a given street to choose between taking lodgers, abandoning the single family house for the multiple dwelling, or moving away, is obviously to modify social conditions. Yet this may easily be done when the street plan is so altered as to force up rents. Again, to allow business or industry to intrude into a residence section, or to leave any attractiveness of outdoor life to commercial exploitation, or to fill the breasts of a streets' residents with new love of home, all these events mean social changes.

A quite different, and simple type of this kind of influence was illustrated by a complaint from settlement workers that the depth of mud on a certain street effectually shut off the settlement from its opposite neighbors, and for weeks at a time checked, almost to extinction, intercourse between all the people on the two sides of the street. Significant also, from this point of view, was a recent protest against garden city methods on the ground that the people for whom such communities are planned really prefer to live in a closer proximity, where they can stand at their doors and yet talk to their neighbors. "The method of living in sparsely scattered homes," exclaimed this writer, "is profoundly unnatural. There is no need for every house to be isolated as if the whole world were a fever hospital." That is as it may be. At all events, it is clear that not only the garden city movement, but the whole suburban drift, which the street platters so cleverly accentuate, is causing widespread social changes.

The limits of this article permit no further excursions into its still novel subject. The four leads by which we have sought to test the worth of the thesis promise, with even so brief a trial, rich returns. It would seem to be certain that street layouts do exert a powerful

sociological influence, late as we have been in discovering, or at any rate in acknowledging, the fact. That it will have more and more attention in the coming years, we may be sure. The sociologist is becoming a power; and when he insists that streets are created to live on, as well as to offer channels for traffic, and that with some of them the former purpose far outweighs the latter, his hint will be popularly heeded. Meanwhile, it is to the credit of modern city planning that it has perceived this for itself—before the sociologists have spoken with authority.